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✧ Physical Culture, a National Want. ✧



AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY

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Physical Culture, a National Want.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :

To even the casual observer of the social defects of our times one of the most charming chapters in Bellamy's now famous book "Looking Backward" will be that wherein he pictures the supposed physical and mental excellence of our human race in the year 2000.

He portrays our posterity as having been freed from the thralldom, not merely of a depraved social state, but from the errors and vices of our present system of mental and physical training as well. According to him, in the year 2000, all institutions of learning will be governed by the following rule :

"The faculty of education is held to the same responsibility for the *bodies* as for the *minds* of its charges. The highest possible physical, as well as mental development of every one is the double object of a curriculum which lasts from the age of six to that of twenty-one."

Thus, Bellamy prophesies, the men of the next century will be stalwart and lithe, the women vigorous and graceful, forming a great and national contrast to the people of our day.

But why, let us ask, should so happy a consummation be deferred for a hundred years? The author finds the reason for the low physical condition of the nineteenth century people in the luxurious ease indulged in by the wealthy class, on the one hand, and in the exhausting duties borne by the laboring classes, on the other.

To a certain extent this may be true: but even in this day, surrounded as we are by all the bountiful resources of a great continent, guided by men of observation and keen thought, ever fostering a spirit of progress and improvement in all human affairs, we dare to hope that the human body will yet receive that just and co-equal care which it deserves; and that, long before our children's children will date their future letter heads with the figures 2000, will our race have attained that degree of perfection which would render the specialist on nervous disease a mere reminiscence, and relieve the mad-house of its population.

The ceaseless chase for wealth, the fast running wheels of progress and invention have unquestionably made us a *nervous* people. Our schools are largely hot-houses, seeking to ripen in a day, what should take weeks and years to mature. Our business enterprises and exchanges are little less than gambling devices, in which there is less effort to *earn* and *save*, than to over-reach and bluff.

Already we have earned the uncomplimentary distinction of originating a disorder which in European lands is known as the "American disease."

It is simply that state of nervous exhaustion and derangement which is at once the penalty and consequence of extreme nervous tension, coupled with an almost criminal neglect of that physical culture which alone can counteract and neutralize the effects of an overtax upon mental and nervous powers.

Physical culture is no outgrowth, however, of modern conditions: its history is as old, well-nigh, as history itself.

The ancient Greeks had their *Gymnasia*, the Romans their *Thermae*; and we are told that both were fostered so as to counteract a tendency to increasing luxury and indolence. Great festivals and games were arranged, and high honors were showered upon the victors and prize-winners. It goes without saying that to their careful, systematic and constant training, these ancients owed that perfection of bodily grace and beauty which has never since been *surpassed* by the human race, if ever *equalled*.

But physical culture among the ancients was confined almost entirely to men, and its primary object was to thoroughly equip them for single combat in their almost constant warfare.

The invention of gun-powder and consequent introduction of a system of distance-fighting caused the military drill to be substituted for a general bodily training, and the gymnasium was practically closed.

Near the close of the 18th Century there came a revival.

Two noted institutions in Germany, those of Basedow and Salzmann, were devoted to the establishment of gymnastics upon a truly scientific and practical basis. At the latter institution, GutsMuths, one of the pioneers in the field of physical culture, held a position as instructor, and to him we are indebted for the first classical work upon the subject. His book „*Gymnastik für die Jugend*“ published in 1793, is high authority still; it displays a style at once vigorous and terse, and many of his utterances are truly epigrammatic. The following will serve as an illustration. He said: "We are not athletes, and our *youth* shall neither knock out their teeth, nor crush their ribs; they shall neither kill others, nor wrench their own limbs. In our exercises we seek *health*, not its destruction. We seek strength, not the unfeelingness of the cannibal; we strive for manly sense and courage, not for unrestrained wildness and license."

It was reserved, however, for a later time and to another mind, to bring what had now become known as the „Turn-Kunst“

(gymnastic art) to a higher perfection, and more historic importance.

In the year 1810, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, becoming convinced that the only hope of ridding his beloved fatherland of French invasion and oppression, lay in a complete restoration of the physical and mental prowess of his people, began that great agitation which led to the first modern out-door gymnasium in the so-called „Hasenhaide“, near the city of Berlin.

By his zeal and magnetism he gathered around himself a constantly growing band of equally zealous and patriotic pupils. By a system of continuous and systematic training he so nerved their bodies, and embued their minds with his own patriotic fervor, that when the hour came for deliverance from the hated French yoke, he had the proud satisfaction of seeing his trusted pupils bear the brunt of battle with a power of endurance theretofore unknown.

But Jahn was not satisfied with destroying French oppression alone. He equally hated oppression at home. His aim was to educate his people to the idea of self-government, and like many another reformer and enthusiasts he was rewarded with a prison cell. The government forbade the conduct of *gymnasia* such as Jahn had established, and for a time the science of “Turning” was proscribed in Germany, except so far as the government permitted its use in the army.

Later on, however, less stringent measures were adopted; and, although even yet the liberty-loving spirit which the practice of true gymnastics engenders, is not favored by the German Empire, still there is not now a school of any pretensions in that country, in which physical culture is not an essential part of the programme, nor a town of any magnitude which does not contain one or more gymnastic societies.

In the German army regular gymnastics are compulsory, and competent authorities have ascribed its splendid victories in the war of 1870 to the superior endurance attained by such exercise.

In recent years all Continental European nations have attached more and more importance to this subject, each adopting a system very closely related to that of Germany.

England alone seems to still content herself with indulgence in sport and professional athleticism.

In this country the first effort to introduce scientific physical training was made by Charles Follen, who arrived in Boston as a political refugee, about the year 1825, became a noted Professor at Harvard University, and there endeavored to put into practical operation his ideas of true physical culture, establishing the first turning school upon our continent. A general and successful attempt to introduce true gymnastics here was, however, not made until the large body of political refugees, who arrived on our shores after the unsuccessful German revolution of 1848, trans-

planted the art and ideas of Father Jahn from German to American soil.

The present North-American Turner-Bund is but the fruit of the noble and tireless work done by those pioneers in the field of physical and mental culture. From a small band of poor exiles, through various reverses and set-backs, this Union has grown to its present membership of almost 40,000. Its societies are scattered through well-nigh every State, and more than 150 trained teachers, specially educated to their task, are bearing aloft the *insignia* of our belief—the torch of enlightenment and the sword of strength!

True to the great principles laid down by Gutsuths, we are striving to lead our people to mental and physical *health*, and we frown upon all efforts at mere athleticism, in whatever form they may appear.

To an intelligent audience it seems needless to explain that the science of "Turning" or true gymnastics, cannot be confounded with athleticism or sport.

Athleticism tends to develop a single faculty or part of the human frame to an unnatural degree. In other words, instead of *aiding* nature in the development of a perfect human being, it tends to develop an abnormal one.

In sport some only of the human organisms are incited to activity and frequently overstrained to the extent of positive injury.

The science of "Turning," or of true physical culture, aims at the harmonious and uniform development of *all* the human faculties. It is so varying in its forms and so adjustable, that it adapts itself to the needs and requirements of each sex, and of all ages and conditions.

Beginning with the simplest movements for the beginner, either in the Gymnasium or in the School room, by a gradual evolution the pupil is passed to a higher state of muscular and functional development.

For girls and ladies separate appropriate exercises are arranged, suited for the development of grace, agility and strength, and no parent nor lady participant need fear that the gymnasium will cause the loss of one iota of female shapeliness and modesty any more than would the participation in those out-door games which girls and ladies love to indulge in.

Yet another code of rules, more easy to be followed, is prescribed for older men who are desirous of still retaining the health and elasticity of youth. These we call bears—and when they are quite gray—"Polar bears."

Whatever may be the *subject* of our teaching, however, its *object* always is to develop and preserve the natural faculties of the person in a *natural* way, not to endeavor to *change* human organisms, but to develop and strengthen them against the unfavorable conditions and dangers that daily surround us.

One of the chief aims of the North-American Turner-Bund has been for years, and is now, to induce our educational bodies to recognize and obey the demands of our school-attending youth for needed bodily relaxation and exercise, while under the great mental strain to which our latter-day school-methods subject them. Such a result is not attained by means of play alone, for *play* or *sport* is not only *one-sided* exercise, but it lacks uniformity, and the very scholars who, from their weakly condition, most need the *stimulus* of a whirl in the fresh air, will be seen timidly standing or sitting around, afraid to display their awkwardness. School-gymnastics remove all these short-comings. Whether practiced in the school-room, hallway or open yard, all derive a like benefit from the brief exercises selected. None receive too little,—none too much, and besides having the operation of their respiratory and circulating organisms restored to normal activity and their wits brightened for a fresh attack upon the (sometimes) hated books, they have also involuntarily learned a very wholesome lesson in *discipline*.

As is usual, when a remedy is sought for an existing evil, many of the attempts to aid in the physical improvement of our race have been exceedingly impractical and some not a little amusing.

For instance, most of you will remember a much advertised machine that was placed upon the market some years ago, and became known by the suggestive name of "Health-lift." It was a most cruel device and no one should have attacked it who was not already endowed with a very considerable portion of health and *back-bone*. To see one exercising upon it reminded you strongly of some men's efforts to lift themselves up by their boot-straps.

Like many another monstrosity it had its day and has now fortunately disappeared.

On the other hand, the extreme of sport and foolish over-exertion in the open air is met in the modern games of base-ball or college foot-ball.

What lasting benefit or momentary mental satisfaction can possibly be derived from joining in a contest over a hollow sphere, the net result of which must necessarily be a mass of broken shins, bruised faces and crushed ribs, we, from our stand-point, are unable to imagine.

It is needless to add that in no sense can the brutalizing exhibitions of the prize-ring be considered as having any connection with true physical culture.

Within the last few years great cheer and encouragement has come to those whose heart is in this reform.

One by one the larger cities have introduced health gymnastics in their public schools. Even our colleges and universities usually so conservative, have nearly all their *gymnasias*, equipped with the best and most expensive appliances. Many, of course, still adhere to some peculiarity or notion, but nearly all, in the main, have adopted

the apparatus and scientific methods recommended by the German masters.

In this city, also, we are engaged in the work of spreading our teachings and striving to secure to every child of school age an equal opportunity for physical and mental development.

Brain-forcing and mental overstrain must be counteracted. The tendency to physical enfeeblement with spinal curvatures and other attending evils must be stopped. The *body* must have its demands recognized as well as the *mind*.

In the words of the poet: "The proper study of mankind is *man*," not as an abstract ideality, but as a living, sometimes suffering *reality*, just as we find him—body and soul.

Our heart is in this work and our success has but barely begun. To carry our labors to a successful issue, to at once realize the happy dream of a Bellamy and the wise injunction of a Gutsmuths, we need the hearty and active co-operation of all intelligent and progressive men and women; with your aid only we may hope to succeed in rearing a people at once sound of mind and strong of body, *happy* as only they can be whose lot is perfect *Health*.



